

---

**Dalmia, Vasudha (Hg.): *Hindi Modernism*.** Rethinking Agyeya and His Times. Proceedings of the Berkeley Symposium February 11–13, 2011. Berkeley: Center for South Asia Studies, University of California 2012. 214 S. 8°. Lw. ISBN 978-0-944613-26-9.

Besprochen von **Nicola Pozza**: Lausanne,  
E-Mail: [Nicola.Pozza@unil.ch](mailto:Nicola.Pozza@unil.ch)

DOI 10.1515/olzg-2016-0012

This book edited by Vasudha Dalmia belongs to the various publications and events marking Agyeya's (Ajñeya's) birth centenary in 2011. Saccidānand Hirānand Vātsyāyan 'Ajñeya' (1911–1987) counts among the most influential writers of Hindi literature, and remains to date one of the major authors of Indian literatures; poet, fiction writer, essayist and editor, he has left his mark on every literary field he explored. However, his fame has not yet crossed the borders of South Asia, except for within the little academic circle of Hindi scholars, teachers and students. Therefore, this volume, consisting of the proceedings of a commemorative symposium held in Berkeley from February 11 to 13, 2011, represents a valuable contribution in its own right. The location of the symposium and the personality of the editor add weight to the project: Berkeley

was one of the two universities (with Heidelberg in Germany) where Agyeya taught and played an important role in developing Hindi literature in the Western academic world, while Vasudha Dalmia, an eminent scholar and figure in the field of South Asian and Hindi studies, had been close to him at various points throughout his life. To pay homage to the contribution Agyeya made in establishing Hindi instruction in the Western academic world, the Berkeley symposium and its proceedings are an attempt “to remember and critically reevaluate Agyeya in his centenary year” (p.5). The general aim of the volume is explicitly stated by Dalmia in her introduction to the book: “to place him [i. e. Agyeya] in his times as emerging out of his network of poets, aestheticians, novelists, and short-story writers, to set aside the later polarities of progressive and experimentalist and consider him alongside his contemporaries: Jainendra, Muktibodh and others” (p.6).

The very idea of a “network of poets” is at the core of the contribution by Ashok Vajpeyi, the eminent Hindi poet, critic and editor. This article is the first of the eleven papers published here and divided into four parts: “Prologue, Prastāv'nā”; “Prose, Gadya”; “Poetry, Kavita”; and “Pedagogy, Adhyayan-adhyāpan”. Three articles have been kept in the original Hindi of their presentation during the symposium – and have no English versions, because the editor “did not want the original tone to be flattened, to get lost in translation” (p.7). While the idea of keeping the original language is valuable and praiseworthy, the absence of English translations contradicts, at least partly, the expressed aim of making Agyeya “better known in the non-Hindi literary world as a major Indian modernist” (p.1), and might limit the scope of the potential readership of this book.

As mentioned, Ashok Vajpeyi opens the volume with his essay entitled “Sāh'carya ki bṛhatrayi” (“The Great Triad of Fellowship”, pp.9–16), in which the focus is not limited to Agyeya alone but to the three poets (the “triad” of the title) – namely Agyeya, Muktibodh, and Shamsheer (Śam'śer) – whose contribution to the rise and development of the *nayī kavita* has been, according to the author, of the highest importance through their own practice of poetry and critical reflexion (p.11). In brief, Vajpeyi considers them all to be equally essential “for understanding the reality of our time and society” (p.16), and successively considers the ways in which they have dealt with topics such as poetry, society or communication, by systematically comparing their respective, and distinct, views and commitment to these topics. Behind this comparison is the idea that despite the habit that has spread in recent decades of looking at authors, and especially

poets, in mutually opposite pairs, the reality is that “there has always been a fellowship between writers ... [and that] the fellowship [between the mentioned three] is an absolutely simple reality and not the result of some ideological affirmation belonging to the realm of criticism” (p.9).

The second essay, also belonging to the first section, is by the professor and essayist Alok Rai: “Modernism – Reading *Pratik* through Agyeya: Reading Agyeya through *Pratik*” (pp.17–28). Its title puts it clearly enough: this contribution is focused on the journal *Pratik* (“Symbol”), edited inter alios by Agyeya and published somewhere (no specific dates were given in the journal) between summer 1947 and spring 1949 (or 1950). After an initial discussion on the journal itself, the author raises the question central to this publication, of “modernism”, by asking “what this recognition of plurality [in reference to the ‘Multiple’ Modernities issue of *Daedalus*] might mean for our understanding of modernity and modernism(s) in the heartland of Hindi – and specifically, in the case of Agyeya and *Pratik*” (p.26). Unfortunately for the reader, this question and its clarification in the context of “Hindi modernism” remains unanswered – here and more generally in the book.

The second section opens with another Hindi paper: Uday Prakash’s “Ajñeya – ap'varjan ke kārāgār” (“Agyeya – Prisons of Exclusion”, pp.30–40). The questions dealt with here by the renowned Hindi writer focus on the “vision” that appears in the first lines of Agyeya’s introduction (*bhūmikā*) to his first novel *Śekhar: ek jiv'ni*. Puzzled by the fact that Agyeya used the roman script for this word, Uday Prakash explores the novel in biographical and philosophical terms, in order to find out the nature of this “vision” and also in which time and place that vision occurred. Mostly based on an analysis of the novel and on interviews Agyeya later gave on it, the contributor stresses both the fact that what matters here is the writer’s own experience – and not only his character Śekhar’s – and the link between the Buddha’s place of death (or *parinirvāṇ*) and Agyeya’s birth place, both Kushinagar.

This novel is also at the centre of the next contribution. In “The Mark of the Political in *Shekhar Ek Jivani*” (pp.41–58), Simona Sawhney wonders why, in the context of the revolutionary movements of pre-independence India, “the connection between [Śekhar’s inner] life and its historical context is not more substantively explored” (p.46). One of her conclusions, after discussing the novel along three topics, viz. gender, caste and violence, is that it may be more fruitful to read it “as part of a process of thinking” (p.56) rather than as a text engaged with the political debates and situation of the times.

Nikhil Govind, through his contribution entitled “What is Modernism in the Hindi Novel?” (pp. 59–76), wishes to talk about “the question in Hindi of the genre of self-narrativization/ autobiography” (p. 59), using for his purpose Jainendra Kumar’s *Tyāg’patr* and Agyeya’s *Śekhar*. Unfortunately, no explanation is provided in the end either on the central concept constituting the title or on the topic of self-narrativisation.

It is Agyeya’s second novel which becomes the focus of interest in Vasudha Dalmia’s essay “City, Civilization, and Nature: Agyeya’s *Nadī ke Dvīp*” (pp. 77–102). While the “new gender equation” in *Nadī ke dvīp* has been recognised long since, the author prefers to stress here the less acknowledged “novel’s near absolute rejection of city-life and its comforts” (p. 77) and speaks of a “new celebration of nature”, beyond the romanticist picture of *chāyāvād* poetry. Dalmia focuses on Rekhā’s and Bhuvan’s frames of reference – i. e. “the experience of the self as an island in the stream of life” for Rekhā, and “‘science’ as an ethical and humanitarian enterprise” for Bhuvan – in order to explore the two main protagonists’ relationship “with themselves and each other as they seek to create and find space within these frames” (p. 78). Besides the relevant web of topics that Dalmia interweaves in her contribution, her main focus on Rekhā’s frame of references and points of view gives to the novel a perspective that is, if not completely original, at least unconventional and wholly justified.

The last chapter of this section deals with four short stories by Agyeya which all contain in their title the word *kahānī* (“story”) and “share certain features in structure and tone” (p. 104) as well as a recurrent concern for *satya* (seen here as hidden truth). A fifth story is added at the end of the essay as another typical example of Agyeya’s art. In this contribution “The Short Story as an *aide à penser*. Ajñeya’s stories” (pp. 103–123), Francesca Orsini develops a convincing analysis of these stories. Her paper rightly fits into the frame of a commemorative volume as it offers an impulse to read the potentially dissuasive stories and style of Agyeya by reminding us: “It is only if the reader is ready to invest in them [i. e. *niṣṭhā* (reverence) and *viśvās* (trust)] that these self-reflexive, oblique and indeterminate stories ‘work’ and reveal their hidden truths” (p. 116). Moreover, it is one of the few articles of the volume to explicitly deal with the concept of “modernism” (p. 115).

Opening the section dedicated to poetry, Barbara Lotz’s contribution “*Rāhoṃ ke anveṣi*: the Editor of the *Saptak*-Anthologies and His Poets” (pp. 125–146) aims at examining several important questions regarding the artistic contribution and literary commitment of the six poets published in the groundbreaking anthology *Tār*

*saptak* (1943) besides Agyeya himself, its “prominent editor” (p. 125). In brief, the author wants “to present and discuss the multilayered interrelations within the *Tār Saptak* group of authors and also look into the role of the critics” (p. 126). Thus, one of the great merits of Lotz’s contribution is that it questions the real role Agyeya played in the formation and the development of the *prayog’vād* movement by recalling to our mind the critical comments the other poets made, especially in the second edition of *Tār saptak* (p. 128), and by analysing, or even deconstructing, Agyeya’s editorial prefaces to the first and second editions (pp. 129f.). Lotz offers us a valuable paper with regard both to the history of Hindi literature and Agyeya’s actual role in it.

In “Two Models of Modernist Aesthetics in Hindi Criticism” (pp. 147–159), Greg Goulding discusses two attempts in modern Hindi criticism to deal with, and develop, “new models of aesthetics and modernism” (p. 159). The author compares Agyeya’s collection of essays on literature *Triśaṅku* (1945) with Muktibodh’s compilation of newspaper columns *Ek sāhityik kī ḍāy’rī* (1964), and highlights some differences between them, for instance that in Agyeya’s case “the work of art is in some way independent from the artist”, while in Muktibodh’s case “a dynamic process within the artist is essential for the creation of the work of art” (pp. 158f.).

Concluding this section on poetry is the essay “*Tār Saptak* Poetry & The Polish Avant-Garde: Observations on the Universality of Artistic Thought” (pp. 160–192) by Renata Czekalska. The main purpose of her paper is to “point out certain similarities in historical as well as literary experiences” of the poets of both (pp. 160f.). In order to do so, she focuses on four themes, which constitute the four parts of her paper: (1) the idea of free verse and the question of imagination; (2) common traits in the perception of the world, these being divided into four categories according to the poets’ view and attitude towards the world, independence, war and revolution, progress and socialism; (3) the metaphor of a bomb as an example of common treatment of matters related to technological progress; and (4) the function of art in society. One of the main conclusions of this rich work of comparison is that beyond the unavoidable differences existing between the Hindi and the Polish poets “the greatest similarity ... was the faith in the educational influence which poetry can have on social reality, on the personality of a human being” (p. 186).

The last section of this volume contains only one essay, the third in Hindi: “Jainendra aur ajñeya par fraÿ’ḍ kā prakṣep” (The Projection of Freud on Jainendra and Agyeya”, pp. 194–214) by Sanjeev Kumar. This detailed

and dense study deals with two among the main “psychological novels” (*manovaijñānik upanyās*) of Hindi literature: Agyeya’s *Śekhar: ek jīv’nī* (1941, 1943) and Jainendra’s *Sunītā* (1935). The author positions himself against the commonly shared view in academic circles and literary histories that this kind of Hindi fiction has been heavily influenced by the theories of Freud, and criticises what he sees as artificial and baseless generalisations perpetuated through an auto-referential process, and resulting from the lack of source reading (pp. 212f.).

To conclude, this book dedicated to Agyeya contains many articles that deserve a careful reading and bring a good quantity of valuable information, even for the specialists of the field, on the eminent author as well as on some of his contemporaries. Its main merit is to contribute in an important way to the still too rare studies on Agyeya available in Western languages by offering original and insightful essays.

A general remark, however, must be made regarding the editing of the volume. The lack of coherency and rigour with regard to the layout, use of translation with quotations and bibliographical references of the articles throughout the volume works strongly against the quality of the papers. There is almost no contribution without at least a few errors regarding the bibliographical references (wrong date, wrong spelling, lack of reference, etc.). Furthermore, abstracts both in Hindi and English would have been much more helpful, especially for readers not fluent in Hindi. Notwithstanding these remarks, this volume brings a valuable contribution to the studies on Agyeya and modern Hindi literature.